

Pentecost XVI (24C)
Jeremiah 4.11-28/I Timothy 1.1-20/Luke 15.1-10
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
16 September 2007

Sin and Joy

~Paul H. Friesen~

We have just heard that the 'tax collectors and sinners' began to join the crowd as Jesus stopped in one of the unnamed villages in the Gospel, and taught as other Rabbis taught. That is the heads of the local semi-criminal tax syndicate, and their trophy wives and mistresses, and their flunkies and the boys from the bar—the folks who never darkened the door of the synagogue —it is these who pressed in to take a Rabbi seriously, maybe for the first time in their lives.

'They drew near,' they wanted to know if it was true—the things people had been saying about Jesus. The pious believers in town were disturbed by this—had they not been saying over and over again to everyone who would listen that they should separate themselves from everything the tax-collectors and sinners stood for? They crowds should separate themselves from the sinner's profane conversation, and the way they fawned over the Roman invaders of Israel, and the way the sinners were cheerfully ignorant of the moral requirements of the Covenant that God had made with their ancestors—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

And yet here was Jesus, with his own odd collection of disciples, socializing with the local notorious. So, the pious thought, this very popular rabbi from nowhere was more interested in this awful crew than in the hard, reforming work of the pious—their mission: to love God and call on God to cleanse the land of the godless Roman regime. So the pious rabbis and their supporters grumbled and lifted their hands up to God and asked how this had happened—how this Jesus was now wrecking their mission.

And then the pious uttered a slur against the reputation of Jesus: 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them'. Strange, isn't it? The voice of Jesus and the complaint of the critics have come down to us, woven together. They are picked up in our own modern Anglican rite, and slightly modified and used for the call to the confession of our own sin before we gather around the table at the Eucharist: *Dear friends in Christ, God is steadfast in love and infinite in mercy; he welcomes sinners and invites them to his table...¹*

But the pious, on that day, were hurt and spoke their bit with hostility: Jesus actually welcomed sinners into his friendship and went off to eat in their houses. What was Jesus thinking? Had he not read the Hebrew prophets about repentance from sin and a life dedicated to God? It made no sense at all to the pious. Had Jesus not thought about the consequences of his actions? Had Jesus

¹ *Book of Alternative Services* (Toronto: ABC, 1985), p.191.

written off all the efforts of his fellow rabbis only to enjoy the praise of these well-practiced sinners? What was Jesus playing at?

And then Jesus replied: 'You hypocrites, don't you understand the deep ethical demands of social justice? Haven't you *really* read the prophets about the spirit of the law? Don't you know that you're the ones going to hell smothered in self-righteousness? Take a good hard look at yourselves and repent!'

No. Actually, Jesus said nothing like this at all. As soon as he heard the complaint of the pious... he told them a story. Actually, he told them two stories. And they weren't about Jesus or about the critics this time. The stories, in the end he said, were about God, and about sinners. They are about the joy of God finding sinners and about the universe echoing God's joy. One of a hundred sheep in found by the shepherd, one of ten coins is found by the householder, said Jesus, and great is the joy.

In fact, Jesus told them three stories, for the story that begins in the verse after today's Gospel ends, begins this way: 'Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons..."'² It's the story we call 'The Prodigal Son' and it ends this way: 'But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life, he was lost and has been found.'³

The pious, that is the hard-working supporters of the synagogue, that is the focused, clear-sighted, mission-minded supporters of national spiritual renewal were told by Jesus stories that illustrated the joy of God reflected in the heavenlies. They needed to hear from Jesus about the joy God feels in finding us again.

Every family has stories about things lost, and stories about things both lost and found. In my spouse's family is the clear recollection of her grandmother and grandfather's story. During their engagement, just before the First World War they were on the beach at Centre Island in Toronto's harbour. And there they had a quarrel. The quarrel ended when she took off her engagement ring and threw it at him. A beach not being an easy place to find a ring it took them some time to find it. According to the family legend, the joy of its discovery led them to the altar.

In talking about God's joy and the joy of heaven Jesus did not neglect to mention repentance—Jesus says twice 'there is joy in heaven over one sinner who *repents*.' It's just that Jesus doesn't always talk about sin the way the pious expected him to, or when they expected them to. We have the same problem.

² Luke 15.11. All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* unless otherwise noted.

³ Luke 15.32.

This depth of teaching about sin is true of the Scriptures as a whole. Jeremiah's 'word from the Lord', for instance, is 'they are skilled at doing evil, but do not know how to do good.'

In other words the prophet has explained that to become evil takes practice, just as much as learning to do good. The question is which we learn to practice—which habits we develop.

St. Paul on the other hand, in his letter to Timothy, says that 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost.' The great apostle wasn't being modest. As John Chrysostom said a few centuries later about these verses: 'It is no humility to think you are a sinner when you really are a sinner.'⁴ Paul knew that he sinned as all of us did. And he named as sin a long list of things that we might not think would stand right next to each other, but all illustrate the absence of the love of God and neighbour: lying, slave-trading, abuse of parents, prostitution (heterosexual or homosexual), profanity, murder and 'whatever else is contrary to sound teaching'.

But in today's Gospel Jesus didn't dwell on the nature of sin. Instead he took the taunt of the pious as a compliment—yes he did indeed eat with tax collectors and sinners. It gave him joy—as it gave God joy—to see them 'draw near' in the village square, stepping forward on the road to repentance. But there was no joy in the face or in the life of the pious critics.

I grew up in a community that had a zealous mission but was not too good at publicly confessing its own sins, and hence not too likely to feel God's joy. But the churches we felt free to criticize—like the Anglican and Roman Catholic—were the ones that regularly confessed their sins. What an opportunity for us. It matters to God that we confess our sins whenever we gather together—it gives him joy that we try to confess them even when we don't 'feel' sorrow. To 'draw near' to Christ, as the tax-collectors and sinners did, is to give God joy.

What would we look like as a parish if we understood God's joy as we drew near? What if we understood God's joy in his approach to us and our approach to him? What would we look like as a church if we rejoiced at the sight of the slightest 'drawing near' to God in the life of someone else? In other words, what would a joyful congregation look like?

Actually there is only one way to find out, and that is through experience. But there are three ways to enter this joy.

The first is through our honesty with God. Do you remember the story of the sinner and the pious worshipper in the temple?—we shall meet the story later this fall again as we continue reading through *The Gospel According to Luke*.

⁴ In *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Colossians, 1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, ed. Peter Gorday (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), p.145.

The pious one enters the temple to catch God up on how well he is doing, filling in the details God might have missed. But the sinner seems to be tarred with the same brush as St. Paul—he is a tax-collector, and he cries out to God the same words over and over: ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner.’⁵ We’re told his honesty was pleasing to God, not the catalogue of the pious worshipper. Honesty is a first step towards repentance and so fills God with joy. We have nothing at all to lose in being honest with God during our private and public prayers. We will instead share God’s joy in being found.

The second path to God’s joy is to hear and see each other ‘drawing near’ to God. I don’t mean to launch us into ‘competitive testimonies’, a practice I have seen at first hand, in which Christians try to outdo each other in conveying the depth of sin from which God has exalted them. Rather, Scripture encourages us to see our fellow worshippers grow in faith, in and out of this sanctuary. It is amazing what joy fills our souls as we see and hear God welcoming our fellows into his company.

It doesn’t matter whether we hear or see this in our worship, or over coffee, or in a parish study group, or in the supermarket. But to meet each other with intention, with a desire to see God at work in each other, is a path into God’s joy.

The third path into God’s joy is to welcome sinners into our company here at St. Paul’s—I don’t mean that we aren’t sinners too, but that we invite strangers to our worship (no matter how well we might know them) to draw near and share God’s joy with us. Being found by God is what we can offer to those who would join us.

Worship, whatever form it takes in whatever denomination or church it might be offered, is at heart a response to God—to God’s acts of love and justice—and a response to God’s joy.

At the very beginning of *Luke’s Gospel* Elizabeth (who is carrying John the Baptist in her womb) receives her cousin Mary (who is carrying Jesus in her womb) into her home up in the Judean hills. And Elizabeth meets her at the door and says: ‘As soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.’⁶

It is this joy we want to enjoy, and to share in our worship, and know this week. And we will, if we open our ears and eyes to God’s joy over lost sheep and lost coins and lost children who have been found.

Amen.

⁵ *Luke* 18.13.

⁶ *Luke* 1.44.